



**Ashburnham Village Center Zoning District Study Committee Meeting
Tuesday, March 4, 2008, 7:00 PM
Light Department, 24 Williams Road**

Members Present: Joseph Daigle, Stan Herriott (Chairman), Joseph Kalagher, John MacMillan, Elizabeth McLaughlin and, Jim Whidden. **Members Absent:** Jonathan Dennehy, Diane Hill and David Perry. **Staff Present:** Eric R. Smith, AICP, Town Planner (Clerk)

I. Introduction: Call to Order

Meeting was called to order at 7:05p.m. Jim Whidden was in attendance for his first Committee meeting. Introductions were provided to the other members in attendance. This meeting was the first Village Center Zoning District (VCZD) Study Committee meeting since January 29th, given that the two (2) scheduled February meetings were cancelled due to the snow.

II. Approval of January 29, 2008 Meeting Minutes

Committee members reviewed Draft January 29th Meeting Minutes provided in mailing. The Town Planner, Eric Smith, provided a new Draft Page 4 noting that the Ashburnham Business Council provides "Welcome Bags." Clarification was also provided by the Committee on the top of Page 2, noting that it was Dave Perry who nominated Stan Herriott as Committee Chairman. John MacMillan motioned to approved the January 29, 2008 Meeting Minutes, with noted changes. Seconded by Joe Daigle. Approved by Vote of 5 to 0.

III. Analyze Existing Conditions

A. Existing Conditions in the Building Environment

The Town Planner presented an Excel spreadsheet document listing all parcels either partially contained or completely contained within the existing Ashburnham Village Center Zoning District. The spreadsheet sorted such parcels from smallest to largest. The inventory of parcels allowed calculation of Average Lot Size (69,094 square feet) and Median Lot Size (21,780 square feet). The Town Planner noted that the Median Lot Size is less than the existing requirement for minimum lot size within the Village Center Zoning District, which is 25,000 square feet.

The parcel inventory was also used to calculate average and median frontage. Though the Town Planner noted this information is not a perfect measurement, because some lots have frontage on two roads, for example. Calculation for Average Frontage on all available lots was calculated at 170.51 feet; Median Frontage was 111.50 feet. The Town Planner noted that the Median Frontage is less than the minimum frontage for a lot within the Village Center Zoning District, which currently requires 125 feet.

The Town Planner then handed out a 11"x17" color GIS Map entitled "Ashburnham Village Center: Existing Land Uses (Draft)." The map shows existing land uses in the vicinity of the Village Center, as identified by the Ashburnham Assessors. Each parcel within the Town of Ashburnham is given a (usually) three-digit code to identify the land use. For example, "101" is a single-family residential use.

The Town Planner noted this map is a draft at this time, because some properties' land use codes did not link correctly from the Assessors' database to the GIS, or are incorrect with what the actual land use is. Moulton's property at 64 Main Street is listed as "011C" for example, and the letter at the end of the code prevented the link to the GIS. Also the Historical Society's property with the Old Meeting House is listed as under "The Commonwealth of Massachusetts." The Committee asked the Town Planner what the letters after certain Land Use Codes mean (For example, Map 62 Parcel 9, which is located at 75 Main Street and owned by Cushing Academy, comes up with a "904R" code.). The Town Planner will ask the Assessor's what these letters mean.

The Committee members then discussed the Map and the Spreadsheet data. The Town Planner noted how the Existing Land Uses Map identifies a "Village Center Commercial Core" in the area along Main Street, between the Hardware Store and up to the Cumberland Farms. Otherwise within the Village Center there is significant amount of existing residential uses, municipal (Ashburnham)-owned land, and Cushing Academy-owned land.

The Town Planner discussed with the Committee about identifying the Average Lot Size and Average Frontage for just those lots within the Commercial Core area. The Committee discussed what lots should be included in the "Commercial Core." John MacMillan suggested lots along the north side of Main Street between Chapel Street and Water Street. For the south side of Main Street, go from roughly Chapel Street to Maple Avenue. Also look to include lots on Pleasant Street, Central Street and Puffer Street.

Another feature located on the GIS Map is identification of the Ashburnham Center Historic District boundary (which includes parcels within a thick red line). This boundary was based on a paper map, prepared when the Ashburnham Center Historic District was created. The exact date was not known at the Meeting, but would be investigated for next meeting. The question was asked if the Historic District and Village Center Zoning boundaries were the same? Town Planner noted that the boundaries do not match perfectly. For example, the Historic District boundary goes as far as west on Main Street to include Diane Hill's parcel (Village Center Zoning District goes to the Corey Hill Road/Lashua Road intersection), goes as far east on Main Street similar to the Zoning Boundary on the north side of Main Street (which is where it meets River Styx Road), though on the south side of Main Street the Historic District boundary stops before Precision Automotive.

Also the Historic District includes parcels along Lawrence Street, Chapel Street, Procter Street, Gingerbread Land, and Water Street (from Main Street to approximately 54 Water Street). Along Water Street, the Village Center Zoning district boundary goes three hundred (300) feet on either side from Main Street to the Cotton Mill Dam. John MacMillan noted that the parcels along Lawrence Street and Chapel Street, currently in the Historic District, have been discussed by the Town Planner has becoming part of a newly created "Village Residential" Zoning District.

Historic District Signs. The Committee members asked Stan if those signs could be lit, as it is difficult to see them, especially during darker winter months.

Jim Whidden asked if the Committee is looking into Parking matters. The Town Planner said yes that is part of the Project Outline and due to come up with in next couple months. But after review of the Project Outline with Timetable, it was determined that yes now is the time to begin discussing parking! The Cancellation of February meetings led to March coming quick!! Jim was concerned about parking requirements, questioned the flexibility of existing Zoning Bylaws and what Board reviews development projects involving nonconforming lots.

The Committee discussed possibility of a municipal parking lot. The Town Planner noted that the Site Walk to be scheduled would allow the Committee to identify existing parking area and their usage patterns. Also noted that when the Police/Fire/Dispatch Departments move from the VMS Building to their new Public Safety Building, more parking around the VMS Building can be made available for Village Center business use. Ultimately signage would need to direct people to those parking spaces.

Stan asked if an Action Item should be placed on the next meeting to vote on a recommended minimum lot size. The Town Planner recommended holding this Action Item off until two meetings. That way at the next meeting, the Committee can review the Average Lot Size and Frontage data for the commercial core lots discussed this evening.

The Committee discussed future availability of municipal parking at the Highway Barn Site, once it is relocated. The Town Planner noted that the Site will likely not be available for redevelopment for sometime, given Town's fiscal situation and difficulty in locating Town-owned land suitable for moving the Highway/Water/Sewer Departments. John MacMillan noted that the results of the Charrette produced a Vision for redevelopment of the site and that all parking would be for uses related to that additional development.

Cushing Academy has identified need for their own parking facility. Town Planner suggested that the Town work with Cushing to make the lot available for municipal and Cushing users. There is vacant land in to the rear of Moulton's 64 Main Street property that could be explored for additional parking. This site was proposed for GFA a few years back. More about parking matters will be discussed at the next meeting and will be placed on the Agenda as a discussion item.

B. Review Existing Market Conditions

The Town Planner provided an update on grant opportunities being sought to get consultant assistance with this effort. The Town of Ashburnham is still awaiting a decision from the Mass. Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) for consultant assistance under their Downtown Technical Assistance program. Awards were originally to be announced by January 25, 2008. A DHCD Representative indicated that decisions should be made by the end of this week.

The Town was not chosen as a recipient at this time under the Urban Land Institute (ULI)-Boston's "Technical Assistance Program (TAP)". ULI-Boston usually selects 2-3 communities per year and for their Spring TAP have awarded Pawtucket, RI. The Town could still be selected for TAP assistance in the Fall of 2008 or Winter of 2009.

The Town Planner noted discovery of online resource from the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Extension's Main Street Program, which has an online "Downtown and Business District Market Analysis" Toolkit. The Website has extensive tools to develop our own Market Analysis for the Village Center, including creating a Building and Business Inventory Database. Also would allow us to analyze our market opportunities by Sector (retail, restaurant, etc.). The info can be

linked to the Geographic Information System program that the Town Planner uses. Although the resource is very detailed, the website recommends that the process would take 6 months to fully analyze all the Town's Market Conditions and Opportunities. However, if the Town does not get funding to have consultant assistance to prepare the market analysis, we would have the tools to do this project ourselves.

Meanwhile, the Town Planner informed the Committee about a new "Seed Grant" opportunity from the newly created North Central Mass. Development Corporation (NCMDC). The Town Planner handed out a two-page summary of this Seed Grant program. A two-page proposal is due Friday, March 14th. The Town Planner intends to apply for consultant assistance, but the exact proposal is dependent on the results of the DHCD. The Town Planner asked Stan Herriott estimated cost to bury the power lines between River Street and Lawrence Street, as well as installing the new historic-themed Street Lights. Stan estimated cost at \$300,000. The Town Planner would put this information in the Seed Grant proposal, to be noted as "leveraged" dollars to assist the Town's Economic Development efforts.

John MacMillan suggested contacting Sen. Brewer's office to see about getting his support for the Town of Ashburnham being awarded the DHCD Downtown Technical Assistance Site Visit program. The Town Planner would provide John with the contact information.

At this time Joe Kalagher presented the Committee members with the Ashburnham "Sanborn" Maps. The Sanborn Maps were originally created for Fire Insurance purposes around the turn of the last century. It was noted that Scott Foster may have a cleaner copy that the last remaining copy owned by the Ashburnham Fire Department. Joe would contact Mr. Foster to see about borrowing his copy to use to scan the maps into electronic format. The Maps show all the existing buildings, which are a great planning resource to assist in the Committee in their efforts in understanding the historic built environment.

IV. Consensus on Goals/Objectives

At the last meeting it was suggested by Joe Daigle to create a Matrix list of what is wrong with the Village Center Zoning District with objectives to work with in fixing the problems. The Town Planner presented his first such issue prepared in this format. The Committee agreed to continue the discussion on this matter until the next Meeting when more Committee members would be in attendance.

A Focus Committee Report from 2000 was distributed to Committee members. This Report was provided to the Town Planner by Christina Sargent, a member of the Focus Committee. The Town Planner noted that on October 18, 2000, the Focus Committee held a "SWOT" – "Strengths Weakness Opportunities Threats" Workshop involving the Village Center. The Report also included list of Goals/Vision/Mission Statement regarding the Village Center. The Town Planner thought this information would be helpful in getting Committee consensus on Goals/Objectives and would not have to 'reinvent the wheel' entirely in getting Public Input, conducting Public Outreach for the Village Center Zoning amendments they make.

John MacMillan noted the idea of a Visual Preference Survey. The Town Planner would work on a Draft Visual Preference Survey document for the next meeting using the sample on Page 325 of the Small Town Handbook excerpts provided at the first meeting. He would also contact the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) to see what sample form they may be available to provide. Then we would just have to put in photos from Ashburnham. The Committee was reminded that the Light Bills could be utilized to send out a one-page, double-sided survey. John

suggested that the Town Planner prepare a draft Visual Preference Survey form for the next meeting.

Elizabeth McLaughlin noted that it is not just zoning that will bring business and people to the Village Center. The Town needs to try to make the Village Center more attractive. Elizabeth questioned why would someone want to open a business if you don't feel the Town is supportive? Town Planner noted how underground wiring and historic theme lighting project will improve visual quality of the VC. Other amenities discussed included sidewalks, curb cuts, cross walks. It was noted that the towns of Ashby and Townsend have put in new sidewalks. The Town of Ashburnham has had an annual amount budgeted and passed by Town Meeting voters for sidewalk improvements. However, in 2007 Town Meeting Voters voted down this funding provision.

Question on what makes a building within the Ashburnham Center Historic District "historic" or "contribute" to the District. Jim Whidden would look into this matter for next meeting.

Question was asked on what is the Main Street Right-of-Way? Jim Whidden noted that in front of the Zenna building, the Right-of-Way comes within a couple feet of the building, to the edge of sidewalk. There was also discussion that Zenna had looked into putting apartments on the second floor, but the Town's parking requirements prevented it.

V. Develop Appropriate Zoning Bylaw Amendments

A. Committee Exercise of Identifying Schedule of Uses (By Right, Special Permit or Site Plan Review)

This matter was tabled until the next meeting to allow for greater participation of Committee members and also the 9:00 hour was approaching.

VI. Scheduling of Future Meeting(s) and Village Center Site Visit(s)

The next meeting of the Village Center Zoning District Study Committee was scheduled for Tuesday, March 25, 2008 at 7:00p.m. Although Stan Herriott will not be able to attend, he offered the use of the Light Department. The Committee members accepted this offer. In addition, the first Village Center Site Visit was tentatively scheduled for Saturday, April 12th from 10am to Noon. The Committee also penciled in Wednesday, April 16, 2008 at 7:00p.m. for a future meeting. The Town Planner would coordinate with the ZBA and Land Use Administrator to ensure that the ZBA does not schedule a hearing for that evening.

The Town Planner will work to put information about the Village Center Zoning District Study Committee on the Town's Web Site.

VI. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn was made by Joe Kalagher. Passed by a vote of 6 to 0. Meeting was adjourned at 9:10p.m.

Meeting minutes submitted by Eric R. Smith, AICP, Town Planner